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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study asked three elementary principals what they did to learn about their school's culture, what informative sources were available, and what hindered their progress. The two principals having a successful year were aware of and responded to school culture; employed various strategies for gathering information from numerous sources; accessed a rich support network; identified themselves as their schools' leaders; maintained an enriched, orderly school environment; and had multiple, successful experiences involving their entire school communities. The principal intending to leave accessed few information sources; did not perceive the existence of a support system; identified personal, rather than school successes; perceived herself as a reading teacher, not a school leader; and was employed in a disorganized, unpleasant environment. The study implies that new principals should: develop an extensive information network; access a variety of support sources; distill and articulate the root meaning of culture; and understand the school's culture. Study limitations and recommendations are discussed. (MLH)

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Running Head: LEARNING ABOUT CULTURE

An Exploration of Strategies Which Elementary Principals New to Their Schools Use To Learn about Their School Culture

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An Exploration of Strategies Which Elementary Principals New to Their Schools Use To Learn about Their School Culture

Introduction

> For most of us, the most poignant awareness of organizational culture usually arises when we perhaps inadvertently transgress some cultural code, norm, or belief even though culture is conveyed to us on an almost daily basis by organizational policies, standard operating procedures, organizational stories, and organizational ceremonies. (Lawson & Ventriss, 1992, p.205)

Names, faces, schedules -- these are the things new principals learn because they are the obvious. New principals are rapidly immersed in an overwhelming array of new challenges, dealing with the internal and external realities of their new schools. Hall and Mani (1992), for example, describe 12 areas of focus for new principals. Adding to this complexity is the knowledge that new principals are under scrutiny by teachers, staff, students, parents and district administrators. "In combination, the heightened internal and related concerns lead to each action and event being magnified in terms of its meaning" (Hall & Mani, 1992, p. 63).

While the details to be addressed by the new principal are overwhelming enough, developing an understanding of how to deal with them requires the ability to interpret each in the context of one underlying reality--school culture. While the culture of the organization is not readily observable, learning the culture is critical for new principals. "The bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them. Cultural understanding is essential to leaders if they are to lead" (Schein, 1992, p. 15). Deal and Peterson (1990) remind new principals that the culture was there before they arrived and will continue after they leave. If new principals choose to ignore the

effects of culture upon their ability to lead a school, it increases their probability of failure (Corbally & Sergiovanni, 1984).

Sooner or later, without cultural awareness, the principal will transgress a cultural code, and a rift forms between the principal and the staff. "Culture shock may be one of the major reasons why people supposedly 'fail' when they leave one organization for another. Where they fail, however, is not necessarily in doing the job, but in not reading the culture correctly" (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 17).

Kelleher (1982), for example, describes the results of his failure to understand the culture during his first year as principal in a middle school. He violates the norms of the school and community around hiring practices, discipline, tracking, cafeteria management and the nature of education itself. Too late he realizes that "...the norms that controlled life in school were different" (p.76). Only as resistance to his administration began to render his plans and actions unworkable did he begin "... to learn and take into account the attitudes and norms of the community and its people. That learning came too late to help" (p. 78). At the end of the year, the school board decided not to renew his contract.

Preparation for a new job as a school principal requires doing one's homework in all 12 areas described by Hall and Mani (1992). Setting these new tasks into the context of culture is more difficult. A number of writers have addressed the importance of learning to read the school culture (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Hall & Mani, 1992; Jentz, 1982; Parker & Hall, 1992; Schein, 1992). How a new principal goes about this task, however, is rarely addressed. It is clear that "...the sensitive principal, who focuses his or her actions on the development of culture and examines the interpretations that the school staff apply to the principal's actions, will have a head start" (p. 64), yet how to accomplish this is unclear. In fact, "...little is know about the cultural or

symbolic orientations of beginning principals" (Roberts, 1992, p. 86). This study focuses on strategies used by three elementary principals new to their schools to learn about the culture of their new schools.

In order to address the issue of how educational leaders new to the organization learn about the organizational culture, it is necessary to define the critical terms in this statement. Definitions of leader, culture, organization and organizational culture are offered by a number of scholars. The following represents a few of these definitions as they pertain to this study.

An organization may be defined as a set of interacting elements working together toward a goal / purpose (Berg, 1997). Organizations are formed when "one or more individuals perceive that the coordinated and concerted action of a number of people can accomplish something that individual action cannot" (Schein, 1992. p. 14).

Whenever organizations are discussed, the role and definition of the leader within the organization sooner or later becomes an issue. The leader assumes a role easily recognized within the organization of influencing the group's direction, guiding the group's course, exerting power over subordinates (Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Graen, 1976; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Zaleznik, 1977). Within the context of organizational culture, however, leadership assumes a new dimension. O'Toole (1995) describes a leader as one who instills hope in one's followers by establishing an atmosphere of trust, by listening, and by showing respect. A leader, above all, is a moral leader who consistently operates with integrity. Schein (1984) defines leadership as the ability to step outside one's culture even as one continues to live within it. He goes on to explain that "leaders create and change culture, while managers and administrators live within them" (p. 5). Several other authors focus on these dual responsibilities of leaders; both managerial and symbolic roles must be mastered (Deal & Peterson, 1994; Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

For a basic understanding of culture, one turns to anthropology which defines it as "the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, speech, action, and artifacts, and depends on man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations" (Woolf et. al, 1961, p. 552). The concept of culture has been adopted by those who see similarities between the behaviors of societies and organizations or other groups. O'Toole (1995) defines culture as "the unique whole - the shared ideas, customs, assumptions, expectations, philosophy, traditions, mores, and values - that determines how a group of people will behave" (p. 72). Deal (1985) offers a more psychological definition as he states that "culture is the learned pattern of unconscious (semiconscious) thought, reflected and reinforced by behavior, that silently and powerfully shapes the experience of a people. Culture provides stability, fosters certainty, solidifies order and predictability, and creates meaning" (p. 301). Bower (1966) defines culture simply as "the way we do things around here" (p. 5). The culture defines what the group is committed to and what members think of each other. It provides a structure by which membership is defined and a process by which members become acculturated (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Hoy & Miskel, 1991; Moran & Volkwein, 1992; Parker, 1994).

As the concept of organizational culture became more widely accepted in business and education, researchers focused on the behaviors very specific to such organizations. Schein (1992) describes organizational culture in the following manner:

> a pattern of basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 12)

Schein (1992) further explains that evidence of organizational culture can include artifacts such as environment of the organization, architecture, physical appearance, technology, and visible or audible behavior patterns, written materials, and stories. In a similar vein organizational culture is defined by Lunenburg and Ornstein (1991) as shared philosophies, ideologies, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, expectations, attitudes, norms, and values. Several authors allude to the strategies of cultural transmission which include artifacts, heroes, stories, norms, socialization, but mainly myths, stories, and histories (Schein, 1992; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1991; Deal, 1985; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Hoy & Miskel, 1991; Moran & Volkwein, 1992). Deal and Kennedy (1982) suggests that culture forms a network which becomes a hidden hierarchy of power within the organization.

Models for analyzing culture

From the review of the literature, Edgar H. Schein and Terrance E. Deal emerge as the most prominent and prolific researchers in the field of organizational culture. Each presents a model for analyzing organizational culture.

Schein's Model

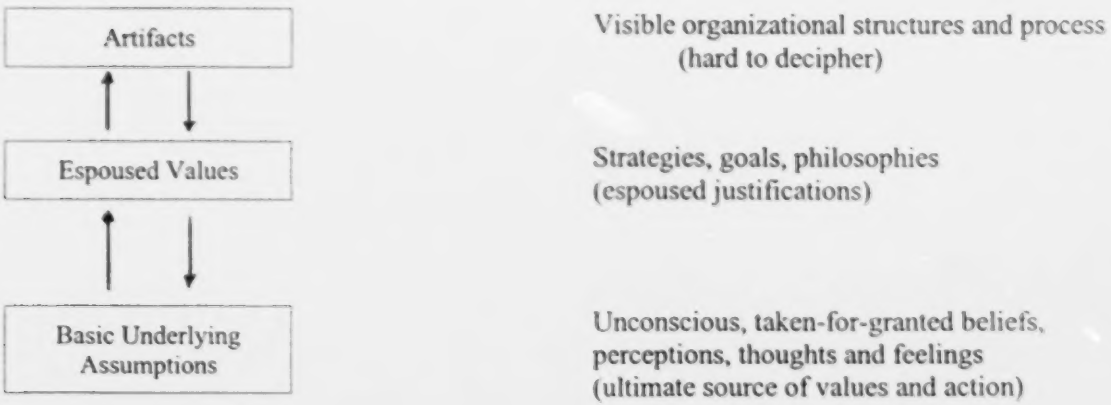
Artifacts
Espoused Values
Basic Underlying Assumptions
Visible organizational structures and process (hard to decipher)
Strategies, goals, philosophies (espoused justifications)
Unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings (ultimate source of values and action)

Figure 1. Schein's model (1992) for understanding and exploring levels of culture.

Schein (1992) explains in this figure the levels of uncovering culture. The surface issues are the artifacts which one finds with the senses (seeing, hearing, feeling). This would include the physical surroundings, language, technology, artistic creations, style of clothing, manners of address, emotional displays, myths, and stories about the organization, published lists of values, observable rituals, and ceremonies.

At the next level are espoused values, the values articulated by the leaders of the group. Through a process of cognitive transformation, the value becomes shared or named as a belief. The value then is validated through socialization of the value throughout the organization.

The deepest level reveals the basic assumptions, the values that have evolved from espoused values to the beliefs underlying the foundational modes of operation. These basic assumptions become theories-in-use. These are the values that are second-nature throughout the organization with very little variation from member to member.

Schein (1992) applies these three levels of culture in analyzing organizations. The process begins with artifacts and follows a fairly quantitative approach in collecting and analyzing data. A more qualitative approach is used to collect data about espoused values and eventually basic assumptions. Until the basic assumptions are understood, it is easy to make mistakes in interpreting the artifacts and espoused values.

Deal and Kennedy's Model

Deal and Kennedy (1982) propose a five step model for learning to read a culture.

Diagnosis: Learning to Read Cultures

1. Study the physical setting.
2. Read what the company says about its culture.

3. Test how the company greets strangers.

4. Interview company people.

5. Observe how people spend their time.

These steps are fairly easily implemented by using accepted observational methods.

While Schein (1992) and Deal & Kennedy (1982) present clear models for analyzing organizational culture, a slightly different approach was developed by Owens and Steinhoff (1989) in preparation for the development of their Organizational Cultural Assessment Inventory (OCAI). They developed a taxonomy of six interlocking dimensions that define culture: (1) the history of the organization; (2) values and beliefs of the organization; (3) myths and stories that explain the organization; (4) cultural norms of the organization; (5) traditions, rituals, and ceremonies characteristic of the organization; and (6) heroes and heroines of the organization.

Purpose of Study

In order to address the question of what do educational leaders new to a school do to learn about the culture, a basic assumption guides this research. The assumption is that cultural awareness is a critical skill for new principals. This assumption is based not only on the literature about organizational culture, but on works specifically directed toward examining the roles, challenges and critical issues facing new principals (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Jentz, 1982; and Parkay & Hall, 1992).

Unfortunately, "there seems to be a depressingly limited amount of information available about what happens to new principals on the job" (Hall & Mani, 1992, p. 50). As a matter of fact, according to Hall and Parkay (1992), before their study of beginning high school principals, Jentz (1982) was one of the few to examine entry strategies of new principals. If the understanding of culture is important to the success of new principals, it seems important to

attempt to develop a better understanding of how principals new to their schools learn about the culture of their schools. This study, then, will explore the strategies used by new principals in elementary schools to learn about the culture of their schools.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative research design utilized the case study method of inquiry. The design paradigm selected for this process represents the qualitative design. The selection of the paradigm is based on the correspondence between the assumptions of qualitative designs and the intents of our study. Merriam (1988) reports six assumptions about qualitative research:

1. Qualitative research is based on process;
2. Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning -- how people make sense of the experiences in their lives;
3. Qualitative researchers themselves are the data collectors, rather than impartial instruments;
4. Qualitative research is based on fieldwork;
5. The reporting of qualitative research is descriptive;
6. The process of qualitative research is inductive, allowing the researchers to develop or build hypotheses, theories, etc. based on the evidence in the data collected.

The qualitative research paradigm was selected because while a variety of scholars have studied organizational culture, and more specifically the culture of schools, the processes used by a principal to learn the school's culture are unclear. Researchers in this field agree that it is important for a principal to learn the culture, there are clear aspects of culture which may be identified and learned, a principal can neither lead effectively or successfully

change elements of the organization without being very familiar with the culture, and, in fact, the principal's continuing tenure in the school depends on learning the culture. A quantitative study might reveal more about of the elements of the culture itself and would certainly be useful in examining the relationship between knowledge of the culture and various variables relating to effectiveness; however, a quantitative study would accomplish little in identifying the processes used to learn the culture.

There were two sources of data collection in this study. The first source was a pre-interview survey meant to acquaint the respondent about the type of questions that he/she was going to answer. This was a valuable source of information for the researchers in gaining insight on the feelings, aspirations, and experiences as a first year principal. The second source of data was collected from interviews of the participants.

The purpose of this study was to understand how educational leaders, specifically elementary principals new to the organization learn about the educational culture, which may be defined as norms, behaviors, and expectations. The following four questions directed this study:

1. What do educational leaders, new to the organization, do to learn about the culture?
2. What processes do educational leaders use to find out about the culture?
3. What sources are available for that information?
4. What gets in the way of learning about the culture?

The Researcher's Role

In a qualitative study the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection. Given this approach, it is important to understand the researcher's background and the values and biases relating to the topic which result from background education and experiences.

In this study, four researchers worked cooperatively. The four individuals have varied backgrounds; all are presently working on doctorates in educational leadership at the University of Northern Colorado. Randall Langston completed undergraduate a B.S. at Sam Houston State University and a graduate degree at Texas Tech University. He has worked as a graduate assistant at both Texas Tech and the University of Northern Colorado. His area of specialty is college student personnel administration. Glenn McClain completed undergraduate degrees in business and religion at small, private colleges and a graduate degree in organizational management at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He has worked for six years as business services director in the Platte Valley School District focusing on the business side of the school district operation. Glenn is working toward licensure as a superintendent along with his degree. Jerry Walseth completed undergraduate and graduate degrees in education administration. He worked for many years as an administrator in the Poudre School District and now serves as superintendent of the Eaton School District. Jerry is working toward licensure as a superintendent along with this degree. Betty Stewart completed undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Kansas. Her bachelor's degree was in elementary education while her master's degree was in junior high school/middle school education. She has taught school at various levels for 17 years including the past 10 years at the University of Northern Colorado Laboratory School/University High. Betty is working toward licensure as a principal along with the doctorate program in educational leadership.

Given the experience in public school settings of three of the researches, the primary bias identified related to expectations of behavior of school principals.

Participants

The participants to be included in this case study were three elementary school

principals. Each of these principals had been on the job for less than one year. Of the sample population selected (N=3), there were two female principals and one male principal.

The researchers did not know the participants prior to the commencement of the study. They consulted the Colorado Department of Education Directory and the Tointon Institute to obtain names of potential participants. Based upon this and consultation with listings of current principals in this region, the researchers drew a sample of three individuals. The researchers were acutely aware that the principal was the gatekeeper in this study and thus made every effort to understand and recognize the position of power that he/she has.

Access in this particular study was gained in an overt nature (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Each of the subjects was told openly about the study and reasons for its commencement. Potential subjects were contacted initially by telephone. The telephone consultation served to help the researchers determine if the individuals fit demographic research parameters and were willing to participate. The subjects in this study were amenable to voluntary participation. To this means, the subjects were supplied with a complete and comprehensive Institutional Research Board consent form that outlined what their participation would entail. The subjects were notified that since their participation was strictly voluntary, they had the right to withdraw from the study.

The Research Instrument

The instrument utilized in this study was the pre-interview questionnaire. The pre-interview questionnaire included demographic and descriptive information. Furthermore, the research instrument sought insight into the individual experiences that each of the respondents had since assuming the principalship.

Data Collection Process

The researchers requested an interview of one hour with each participant. Each of the participants was asked to fill out the consent form prior to the interview. Two interviewers were involved in the interview process. The first researcher questioned the participant while the other researcher took notes and observed. The interviews were tape recorded with full assurance from the researchers that confidentiality would remain in place.

Interviews were conducted at each principal's school. With one researcher acting as the questioner and the other researcher as the transcriber/triangular, the interview went along very smoothly as each of the participants freely answered the questions posed to them. After the interview was completed, the researchers immediately collaborated and wrote down additional notes to help them with data analysis.

Data Analysis Process

Upon completion of data collection, the field notes were analyzed. Field notes were then coded into specific categories through a joint effort by all researchers to establish common themes. The information was then summarized and interpreted by the researchers. This information gave the researchers tangible evidence of the respondents similarities or differences in understanding school culture. Some of the themes that emerged in this study included: leadership, relational, information source, and success.

One factor that did emerge was that a participant revealed her intention to leave her position by the end of the school year. This decision influenced her responses and the researchers interpretation.

Establishment of Trustworthiness

The establishment of trustworthiness is critical in any qualitative study. Trustworthiness is based upon four fundamental considerations: a) credibility, b) transferability,

c) dependability, and d) confirmability. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) research credibility is essentially comparable to internal validity in quantitative research. Credibility in this study was established by member checks. We chose to utilize member checks as our preferred way of interpreting the data. Member checking is essentially the process of going back over the data and determining if what is being said is compatible with the information supplied. This research team spent considerable amounts of time checking and re-checking data. Member checking was accomplished through two strategies: first, the two research team members who conducted the interviews discussed each interview immediately following to clarify their understanding of the data collected. Next, the researchers reviewed the data collected with the other two team members, to clarify understanding of the data collected.

Data was checked in a number of ways. First the research team individually sifted through all the data. Each member of the team came up with his/her separate list of those categories which were seen as most prevalent throughout the dialog. Next, the research team reconvened and began to analyze the data. Each member of the team offered his/her own explanation for why the category was coded under a particular label. Next, each member of team made the case for that particular category. Once consensus was established, the team identified five major themes. The team spent time explaining why each of these categories was identified.

Transferability is the next issue of trustworthiness that must be addressed in qualitative study. Transferability is the rough equivalent of external validity in quantitative research design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is the thick description of the research that serves to help generalize the study for the next researcher who chooses to take up this topic. This study acts as a guide for future researchers who may seek to expand upon this topic.

Reliability, the next measure of trustworthiness, asserts that interpretations and

experiences remain static across all contexts. Another way to look at reliability is to consider if two researchers independently come up with similar findings (Bogden & Biklen, 1992). The research team determined that the procedures used in this study were both reasonable and applicable and, therefore, reliable. To further establish reliability, the research team presented findings to a class and requested feedback.

Confirmability, or using multiple sources for confirmation of data was implemented in this study. Confirmability often forms the grounding for the researcher(s) to draw plausible conclusions and forms the basis for the audit trail. Based on the explanations given and the prolonged engagement in the field the researcher can then establish confirmability (Ely, et. al, 1991).

The research team established confirmability in a number of ways. The team utilized triangulation during the interviews, engaged in peer debriefing after the interviews, and carefully organized the data so that it could be retrievable by later researchers. Confirmability was also established through the use of field notes, interview surveys, and data analysis. All of these methods produce what is referred to as an audit trail. Essentially the audit trail is information written or spoken that is used in the research which can be later referenced by other researchers.

Discussion

From the evidence collected in this case study and from the analysis of the data, we have identified five themes which might be a useful guide to others entering new schools as elementary principals. These themes were examined in light of the results from our interviews. Following will be a discussion of the limitations of the study. Together these lead to recommendations for further study.

Conclusions

In presenting the following conclusions, the word successful is used to describe the views of the principals regarding their own experiences. As results of their experiences they plan to continue their principalship and they expressed pleasure with the outcomes of their first year and their new positions.

* The two principals having a successful year were aware of and responded to school culture.

* The two principals that were having successful year employed a variety of strategies for gathering information and utilized a varity of sources.

* The two principals having a successful year accessed a rich network of support

* The two principals having a successful year identified themselves as leaders of their schools.

* The two principals having a successful year maintained an enriched, orderly school environment.

* The two principals having a successful year perceived themselves as having multiple, successful experiences involving their entire school communities.

* The principal not wishing to continue did not access a variety of informational sources.

* The principal did not feel that a support system existed.

* Successes identified referred to self rather than school effort.

* She perceived herself as a reading teacher rather than as a school leader.

* The principal not wishing to continue was employed in a disorganized and unpleasant environment.

Implications

A few implications can be draw from the preceding conclusions.

* Principals should develop an extensive network of information sources.

* It is important for principals to access a variety of support sources.

* The principals we described as successful were able to distill and articulate the root meaning of the culture.

* The understanding of culture is a primary factor in a successful first year principal experience. This reinforces the findings expressed in the literature.

Limitations

After reflecting on the process and analyzing the data, a number of limitations of the study became evident.

* Only three subjects were included in the study.

* The amount of time the researchers spent with the subjects was limited.

* All of the questions focused on what was observed and actual events. It would have added depth to include questions to determine what topics were avoided and what topics were taboo in their school culture.

* The researchers had limited qualitative research experience.

* The recording equipment did not function properly.

* In the middle of one of the interviews one of the subjects announced that she would not continue in her position as principal. This had a negative influence on data interpretation. It's also possible the subject was only discussing negative aspects of her experience because of her frame of mind.

Recommendations

And finally the merging of conclusions, implications and limitations lead us to the following recommendations. These recommendations are presented for the consideration of future researchers of educational leader detection of organizational culture in schools.

* Expand the range of questions to address issues which might be avoided and topics which might be considered taboo in the school culture.

* Increase the number of participants in order to provide a wider demographic representation.

* Further studies might verify the conclusions observed in our limited study.

Future studies might provide first year principals with strategies for understanding the culture of their school.

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